

MERRILL WAGNER



Diagonal Downhill, 2012, rust preventive paint on steel, 18.75 x 38.5 inches

Merrill Wagner's geometric wall reliefs made of salvaged steel and linen—inspired by the negative spaces in leftover metal scraps—evoke forms found in nature. From the patterns that result from cooling hot sheets of steel with water to sealing existing irregularities with paint, Wagner both encourages and preserves the effects of the elements. Noted for her dedication to conveying the romanticism of the great American landscape, Wagner creates dynamism between contrasting colors and geometric abstraction and creates a balance between man versus nature, sculpture versus painting.

Originally from the Pacific Northwest, Wagner moved to New York in the late 1950s after graduating from Sarah Lawrence College. In the early 1960s, she worked in geometric abstraction using canvases, hard edges and bright contrasting colors. In the late 1960s, inspired by Eva Hesse, she started to experiment with different materials. She explored textures, patterns and the ways different media would sit on top of or repel one another. This experimentation would prove to be an ongoing fascination.

By the 1980s, Wagner was painting on stone, steel and slate, focusing on the surface of the material, the geometric patterns inherent within it, and ordering the painting around its individual marks, blemishes and colors. For Wagner, these enormous paintings represented those things within the landscape that cannot be changed—the ocean, the desert, or the night sky. As Roger Boyce noted in an *Art in America* review, "The material gravity and anonymous esthetic of the industrially manufactured [materials] stand in for the assertive indifference and receptive sublimity of nature."

Wagner's long-term projects are more akin to scientific experiments than works of art. Her "paintings" are sometimes no more than a series of squares of similar hues from different paint manufacturers on a cedar fence. Her purpose is to study the effects of the elements on the paint itself. The squares are photographed at regular intervals in an effort to allow the viewer to experience the passage of time. The painted sections disappear, reappear, gather texture, and eventually become shadows of their former selves. Critic and curator Lilly Wei has noted that works of this type "give plein air painting literal meaning." Placing the work directly into the landscape and leaving it there, Wei says, "is ultimately a gallant and quixotic gesture, the willful act of an artist who wants to make her mark on nature while soliciting nature's active participation."

Merrill Wagner has been a member of American Abstract Artists since 1976 and served as its president from 1982 to 1985. Her work is in the Bellevue Arts Museum and the Tacoma Art Museum, Washington; the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts; Chase Manhattan Bank and Goldman Sachs, New York; and the Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, Washington.

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